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ABSTRACT

Writing assignments involving newspaper portfolios or analyzing the content of a film (animated or live action) are interesting because they help students become involved with course content and improve students' critical thinking. A study examined writing assignments of these types from 21 students taking two sections of a course on child development offered at a mid-sized school in western New York. Students wrote two term papers during the semester course. One term paper required students to identify and explain 10 aspects of child development depicted in an animated film. The second term paper required students to develop 20-item newspaper portfolios. Both assignments required using theory and research from the course. Results indicated that students perceived the animated film assignment to be more useful as a critical thinking exercise than the newspaper portfolio assignment. (NKA)

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Comparing Animated Film and Newspaper Portfolio Writing Assignments

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Abstract

Students in a course on Child Development wrote two term papers during the course of the semester. One term paper required students to identify and explain 10 aspects of child development depicted in an animated film. The second term paper required students to develop 20 item newspaper portfolios. Both assignments required using theory and research from the course. Results indicated that students perceived the animated film assignment to be more useful as a critical thinking exercise than the newspaper portfolio assignment.

Introduction

Writing assignments involving newspaper portfolios or analyzing the content of a film (animated or live action) are particularly interesting because they help students become involved with course content and improve students' critical thinking (Fleming, Piedmont, & Hiam, 1990, Kirsh, 1998, Rider, 1992). Furthermore, assessments of film analysis and newspaper portfolio assignments have both received highly favorable student ratings (Kirsh, 1998, Rider, 1992). However, little research has compared students' perceptions of film analysis and newspaper portfolio assignments in a single study. Although the goal of the both assignments is to enrich students' understanding of theory and research relevant to development, it may be that students perceive newspaper portfolio and film analysis assignments differently in terms of their ability to promote critical thinking and provide a challenging, intellectually stimulating exercise. Therefore, the aim of the present study was to compare students' perception of assignments requiring the construction of a newspaper portfolio with assignments involving the analysis of film content. To assess this goal, students in a course on Child Development wrote two term papers during the course of the semester. One term paper required students to identify and explain 10 aspects of child development depicted in an animated film. The second term paper required students to develop 20 item newspaper portfolios.

Method

Participants

Participants were 21 students taking two sections of a course on child development offered at a mid-sized school in Western New York State. Approximately 88% of the participants were female.

Procedure

The animated film and newspaper portfolio assignments were due in the 9th and 15th weeks of a 15 week semester. Each assignment was worth 10% of students' final grade. After turning in their respective assignments, students anonymously responded to a short questionnaire about the assignment.

Measures

Animated Film Assignment. Students wrote term papers about 10 aspects of development depicted in an animated film. Students analyzed the film using theory and research from the course. For each aspect of development identified, students provided at least two examples from the animated film and clearly explained how the examples depicted that aspect of development. Topics discussed by students included attachment patterns and child outcomes, discipline techniques and child outcomes, parenting styles and child outcomes, friendship development, the value of peer support and moral development.

To facilitate students' understanding of the assignment, several times during the semester, students were shown video clips from an animated film and asked to discuss developmental themes in the movie. For instance, after viewing the opening scene from Beauty and The Beast, in which Belle sings a song as she walk through the town, students identified components of the ecological environment and several genetic-environment correlations. Students chose the film they evaluated, but their choice required instructor approval. This requirement ensured that students would choose films that contained multiple developmental issues. Papers were graded on the relevance to the course, accuracy of comments, breadth of coverage and, overall quality of writing.

Newspaper Portfolio Assignment. The Newspaper Portfolio assignment required students to generate a portfolio of 20 newspaper and/or magazine clippings relevant to issues of infancy and child development. For each clipping, students were required to (1) state the source (including dates) and (2) write an explanation or interpretation using course material. Papers were graded on the relevance to the course, accuracy of comments, breadth of coverage and, overall quality of writing. To help facilitate understanding of this assignment, students were given a sample write-up of a newspaper article. Journal articles were not allowed for this assignment.

Assignment Rating Form. Students were asked to rate the assignment in terms of its educational value, how well the assignment improved their ability to understand course material, how much they liked the assignment, and the usefulness of the assignment as a critical thinking exercise. Each question used a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (poor) to 4 (excellent). Additional comments were solicited as well.

Results

A series of repeated measures t-tests was conducted to see if students rated the animated film and newspaper portfolio assignments differently. Results indicated that students perceived the animated film assignment to be more useful as a critical thinking exercise than the newspaper portfolio assignment, $t(20) = 2.23$, $p < .05$. No other significant differences were found. See Table 1 for means and standard deviations for each question.

Discussion

The results of the present study suggest that students view animated film and newspaper portfolio assignments similarly when it comes to their educational value, ability to improve understanding of developmental concepts and enjoyability. However, as a critical thinking

exercise, the animated film assignment is viewed by students as more useful.

I too believe that the animated film assignment may require more critical thinking than the newspaper portfolio assignment. Many of the articles students use in newspaper portfolio assignments are easily identified as being related to child development by their title. For instance, when students see an article entitled "Breast milk linked with intelligence" they can use the words in the title to explore their textbook and notes for similar concepts. In contrast, in order to successfully complete the animated film assignment, students need to have some understanding of the developmental concept they are going to apply in advance before they can identify the developmental concept in the animated film. Many students have difficulty identifying developmental concepts without explicit referents provided.

For both the animated film and newspaper portfolio assignment, students consistently identified the requisite number of developmental themes and provided accurate descriptions of those themes. However, several students had difficulty making the explicit written connection between a developmental concept and the article/animated film. That is, the student failed to explain why a particular behavior in the animated film or concept in a newspaper article exemplified a particular developmental concept. In the future, I plan on giving more opportunities for students to practice writing-up the connection between a developmental concept and an article/animated film behavior.

In contrast to previous research (Kirsh, 1998, Rider, 1992), the animated film and newspaper portfolio assignments both received only marginally favorable ratings. Anecdotal evidence from student comments suggests that the relatively low ratings for both assignments may reflect the fact students perceived the work required for each assignment was as very demanding.

whereas the weight of each assignment towards the final grade (10% each) was perceived as worth very little. One student wrote about the animated film assignment, "the paper was way too long for something worth only 10%." Another student suggested that there were "TOO MANY ARTICLES" in the newspaper portfolio assignment.

References

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Kirsh, S. J. (1998). Using animated films to teach social and personality development. Teaching of Psychology, 25, 49-51.

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Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations By Assignment and Question Type

Question	Assignment	
	Animated Film	Newspaper Portfolio
Rate the assignment in terms of:		
*Usefulness as a critical thinking exercise	3.19 (.75)	2.71 (.72)
Its educational value	2.86 (.65)	2.90 (.62)
Ability to improve your understanding of developmental concepts	3.00 (.77)	2.81 (.68)
How much you liked doing the assignment	2.29 (.85)	2.24 (.70)

* $p < .05$